

“Make Your Own Drama” in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

Drama has been used for various educational purposes in Europe, North America and beyond. By putting their own feet into someone else’s shoes, students learn what it might be like to be e.g. an immigrant, a foreigner, to be bullied at school, etc. It is also a useful tool for the understanding of literature. After studying novels, poetry, or historical events, students appreciate being in the actual scene as a part of the story. For the purpose of language teaching, Holden (1981) indicates the aim of using drama is to bridge a gap between the classroom and outside world;

They (students) have learnt English in the overprotected world of the classroom, and are unprepared for the ‘coughs and hesitations’ of the outside world. It is up to the teachers to prepare them for this element of the unexpected and, as we shall see, this can often be done through drama. ...The teacher can provide situations in which his students can experience the emotions and impulses from which communication develops. (2-3)

Drama is a useful medium in the communicative language classroom where the

focus is placed on the meaning of the language rather than the form. Activities come in various forms depending on purpose, curriculum, class size, or experience. I would split them roughly into two categories; work with text and work without text. The latter one in particular encourages learners to try to communicate using their own limited language. There is more freedom for students to create personal meaning from the activity. However, the advantage of working with a script is that it provides vocabulary and also helps students explore multiple viewpoints of the narrative. "...pupils are not trying to replicate the intention of the author but are being offered a 'free-play' around the text to interpret and develop their understanding." (Fleming 1994: 118) This paper suggests a method which combines the advantages from both — work with and without texts. Students develop scenes by improvising and putting them into written text. With this method, students examine and analyze the issue through discussions, then making their own narrative provides them with deeper understanding. Communication skill will be developed during rehearsals of their own play. By writing down their own language, it is more likely to stay in their memory for a long time. This process also works with the emotional side of language learning because of the nature of drama which is closely related to the participants' mind.

At the heart of all thought and meaning and action is emotion. As "intellectual" as we would like to think we are, we are influenced by our emotions. It is only logical, then, to look at the affective (emotional) domain for some of the most significant answers to the problems of contrasting the differences between first and second language acquisition. (Brown: 1993)

I will discuss some aspects of the affective side of learning, relating them to second language acquisition (SLA). Affective domain is referred to as personality factors within a person that contribute in some way to the success of

language learning (Ibid). Particularly, I will focus on obstacles to learning, and describe how the method overcomes them. The strategy outlined was developed by me specifically for the Chubu University Oral Communication Course, 2007 Autumn term. The course met twice a week, there were 15 students. The goal was to perform at the Oral Communication Festival sponsored by JACET (The Japan Association of College English Teachers). One of the scripts made by students is attached as appendix.

1. Method

This method, in which students build their own drama and then perform it is not new. Details are varied depending on the objective, class situation and the teachers involved. Students start the process by discussing a theme. I will explain the procedure I took for my oral strategy course. The theme was “intercultural misunderstanding”. In small groups of 5~6, students shared their own experiences from travelling overseas or from meeting foreigners in Japan. One group decided to work on the exchange between a shop assistant and foreign customers at a hamburger restaurant in Japan. The purpose was to demonstrate that something you take for granted could be difficult to understand for foreign people.

The group produced a brief outline which they later divided into two or three scenes for improvisation. Students were directed to think about the situation in detail: e.g. Where is it set? Are there other people around? What is being said? Why? The element of conflict should become an integral part of the scene. In one of the scenes the group produced; the American customer complains that the size of the drink she ordered is wrong — she ordered medium but thinks she was given small. The shop assistant tried to explain that the size was correct. Conflict arises where they do not realize that Japanese “M” size and American medium size are not the same thing. Consequently they try to persuade each

other that they are correct. Thinking about details of the conflict creates tension. The tension here must not make students feel nervous. It should help learners to think, in real life situations, how they would react and what they should say and do. For example, the shop assistant in the scene is; 38 years old. He is very keen to work here. For him, the “Manager Manual” is very important. He is not confident with English at all.

The above passage demonstrates how the tension causes attention to be drawn to the use of language as well as the vocabulary. Consequently, the words and how they were used will stay in memory for a long time, the language is more likely to be acquired. After improvisation, students develop a script for the scene. This process is repeated for other scenes until the whole script is complete.

2. Students’ feedback

One of the benefits of this method is that students are relatively free from the pressure of memorizing the lines. Lines were created through improvisations by themselves thinking “If I was in this situation, I would say...” Also, making their own story gives them the confidence to communicate and speak in scenes. They know how the story will unfold, what will happen and why. They discussed details of the characters, their feelings, and reactions to events in the story. Students are aware of the meaning of language and how the meanings had been created. Here is some translated feedback from students;

“Since the story was based on our own experience, we could demonstrate the story conveying the atmosphere and the feeling”;

“It was easy to memorize the lines, I feel very attached to our story.”

Quite often drama teachers observe that shy students show positive performance in drama. I have seen this many times; students who normally do not express

their opinions in discussions, became suddenly active in drama or role-play. The next section discusses some aspects of "learner anxiety" in order to identify what aspects of drama, particularly this method, can encourage students to contribute in the communicative language classroom.

3. Learner Anxiety

Anxiety plays an important affective role in SLA along with other psychological factors such as self-esteem, inhibition and risk-taking. (Brown: Ibid) MacIntyre describes how language anxiety occurs when a student associates anxiety with the second language.

Students doing well in other courses may find language-learning to be very different, possibly because of personality, specific problems with language acquisition, or specific reactions to a language learning context. (31)

Language anxiety causes a negative emotional reaction to be aroused when learning or using a second language. Anxiety reduction strategies may be beneficial for advanced learners. (MacIntyre, Clement & Donovan 2002) On the other hand, the notion of *facilitative* anxiety has been identified as a positive factor by some workers. The determination to complete a task spurs students to success. Bailey states that facilitative anxiety was one of the keys to success. (In Brown: 1993) It is closely related to competitiveness which causes learners to work harder. "Both too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of successful second language learning." (Ibid: 143)

4. Emotional Scripts

One of the difficulties in speaking a foreign language is to express emotions. Learners may find it difficult to show their feelings, or be understood in inter-

cultural contexts. Yashima (2006) contends that mastering the frame work of emotional scripts, which are socially shared and acquired as cultural models, is the key to better communication of feelings.

Cultural models are acquired through everyday experiences — how you view events, people, behaviors, and that would be imprinted in people’s mind through negotiation of meaning. ...Similarly people learn how to react and express their feelings in the various contexts of their own culture. (p.45 my translation)

The difference between emotional scripts emerges in intercultural contexts. Since language is closely related with emotional scripts, second language learners often find it difficult to express their feelings. Yashima (2004) shows the case of a high school student on a language program in America; her host sister kept using her clothes without asking. The student did not say anything; firstly because she was not confident with her English, secondly, she did not want to have an argument, and she was thinking that someday the sister would help her. Yashima analyzes the case from a cultural psychological point of view and concludes that Japanese tend to hold their angry feelings, and try to avoid conflict. The attention is on the other person’s feeling but not on themselves’. Yashima also indicates that from the SLA point of view, if the exchange student had higher language competence and knowledge of the culture she would have taken some action even if she did not acquire the different emotional scripts. “In the second language situation, in order to express feelings, several aspects such as cultural differences, introvert/extrovert personality, language competences all need to be taken into consideration.” (p.53 Ibid)

5. Language and Emotion

When speaking a second language, people often feel not quite themselves, they do not feel right using particular words or phrases. Kubota (2005) relates his

own experience at a party held for EFL students in America. The idea was for EFL students to use English with people outside of the classroom. The teacher suggested that Kubota approach a lady and start a conversation saying “what a lovely scarf!”. The conversation did not take off because “what a lovely scarf!” was not something he would say in real life. However, probably because of his emotional scripts as a Japanese, he could not refuse the teacher’s suggestion. Every culture has words which are unique to their language. For example, in Japanese “yoroshiku”, or “haji” do not translate into English. Dewaele calls languages other than the first language (L1) as ‘the language of distance and detachment’. (in Yashima 2006) Dewaele & Pavlenko indicate that most of the bilingual speakers prefer to use their L1 to show strong feelings such as anger and swearing, affection, or disciplining their children. According to Dewaele (2008) multilingual people typically perceive the phrase I love you as having more emotional weight in their L1. As learners develop the language skill, there is a conceptual shift towards the emotional script of the language. Dewaele introduces the suggestion that, for some Japanese; the emotional script to express love in their L1 was in fact entirely non-verbal. The intermediate students in my course tend to use “like” instead of “love” when they talk about their favorite things. One challenge for Japanese students is that “Aishiteru (愛してる)” has a very strong interpersonal meaning that is not usually associated with inanimate objects or other events. Even after learning that you can use the phrase “I love...” to refer to things, almost all students say “I like playing soccer very much.” Now they do not see the phrase “I love...” as showing strong emotion and so feel the need to emphasize their opinion. These indicate SLA classroom instruction should include activities where learners have opportunities to learn to express their emotions. In the next section I will discuss how the process I have described makes learners feel comfortable in saying what they want to say and also help them acquire the language.

6. Discussion

One of the negative views of play performance is that it is always linked to stage fright. Students may feel under pressure to memorize lines, this is a source of anxiety. In the method I described in the previous chapter, the focus is on the process of making. Working with groups provides students with security. Groups may be reluctant to show their skit at first, however, a couple of rehearsals will make them feel positive about it. Watching other groups present also works as a ‘trigger’. They are more interested in the subject, they appreciate different ideas, and understand minor points which would otherwise be missed.

Drama is often referred to as a tool to ‘put yourself in someone else’s shoes’. Not many beginners or intermediate learners have yet experienced different emotional scripts. Discussion with their peers about the characters in the skit, the situation, or the story, and then taking part in the performance will help learners to think in other ways, to view a situation from multiple perspectives. Learners may experience a shift of their emotional scripts but in the security of the classroom. Some students may have had some difficult experiences in intercultural communication; difficulty in making friends during an overseas exchange program; miscommunication with their host family, etc. Drama therapist Renee Emunah suggests that enactment of an unpleasant experience should start with discussion with peers and lead up to acting it out. After the first “performance” of the event, they discuss it in order to modify the scene, making suggestions such as; “Instead of telling your friend off, you could probably say...” They repeat the scene until the student feels satisfied. Emunah mentions that enactment of your own experiences makes yourself feel bigger than the problem and so helps maintain self-esteem.*¹ This process of play production builds on the negative experiences of L2 learners, the anxiety created by the bad experience is transferred to the positive anxiety of wanting to get it right.

In L1 or L2, people tend to have some words or phrases they like to use or prefer not to use. The benefit of making your own drama is that learners are free from using words or phrases that they feel "wrong". For Japanese learners, phrases such as "I love you", or "What a nice scarf!" may feel unnatural and so may cause anxiety. If learners are empowered to use their own words and given an opportunity to practice them, in a safe classroom environment, language is more likely to be acquired. Even the simple phrase "Thank you." can have a range of meaning (gratitude, acknowledgement, good bye). By experimenting with language and context students begin to raise their cultural awareness. Emotional scripts can be decoded and so improved communication results. Thus, learners can challenge themselves with vocabulary which is new or not quite their own. The "Language of distance and detachment" may be significantly reduced.

Conclusion

This paper began by discussing drama for communicative language teaching. A method in which students make their own drama based on their own experience was introduced. By repeating the process of discussion, improvisation, and script writing, a skit is produced. Learners will be attached to the language used and so contextual vocabulary will be acquired. The method is also beneficial for the affective side of language acquisition, particularly in reducing anxiety. This work could possibly be extended to help students understand why their confidence in the classroom is not always translated to their real world experience.

Appendix

Culture Clashes!

Episode 1

At a Small Fast Food Store

Casts: Tourist 1 Osamu
Tourist 2 Ayako
Manager Kenji
Staff Seisuke

Manager : あのさあ、挨拶の声はもっと大きくね。
Staff : はい。
Manager : ここはいいから、キッチンやって。
Staff : はい。 *Off to the kitchen*

Tourist 1 and Tourist 2 enter the shop.

Manager : いらっしゃいませ～！
Tourists 1, 2 : Hi!!
Manager : Fine, Thank you!
藤田くん、藤田くん！ 外人、外人！ *Off to the kitchen*
Staff : Hi, can I help you?
Tourist 2 : He speaks English!
Tourist 1 : Oh, good. Yes, please.
Staff : What would you like?
Tourist 2 : Hm... Do you have a 'Set Menu'?
Staff : Ah... Yes. 'Fresh Burger Set'
Tourist 2 : What?
Tourist 1 : Oh, Fish burger?
Staff : Yes, Fresh burger.
Tourist 2 : Fish?
Staff : Yes. Fresh.
Tourist 1 : Oh, fresh fish?
Staff : ... Yes.
Tourist 2 : Ok. I'll have that. *To Tourist 1* How about you?
Tourist 1 : Yeah, fish burger sounds good. *To Staff* Two Fish Burger Sets, please.
Staff : Two Fresh Burger Sets. What would you like to drink?
Tourist 2 : Coke, please.
Tourist 1 : Yeah. Me, too.
Staff : What size?

- Tourist 2 : Medium.
 Tourist 1 : Two mediums, please.
 Staff : Thank you. 1,400 yen, please.
 Handing the number plate Please sit down, and wait.
- Tourist 2 : What?
 Staff : Please wait.
 Tourist 1 : **To Tourist 2** We sit down. He'll bring the food.
 Tourist 2 : Oh. It's like a proper restaurant.
- Staff : **Bringing food** Here you are. **Walks off.**
 Tourist 2 : Excuse me!
 Staff : ?
 Tourist 2 : This is not medium size!
 Tourist 1 : It is, actually.
 Tourist 2 : No, it's not!. I don't wanna pay 700 yen for this!
 Staff : This is Medium.
- Manager : 藤田くん！ 藤田くん！ 大丈夫？
 Tourist 2 : Excuse me! Sir!
 Manager : Sir? Me?
 Tourist 2 : Yes. We ordered medium size, but this is SMALL!
 Manager : Is this small?
 Tourist 2 : Yes!
 Manager : You want 'lagrge' ?
 Tourist 2 : No! I wanted 'medium', and this is not medium, it's SMALL!
 Staff : This is medium!!
 Manager : Just a moment. マニュアル、マニュアル…!!
 Checks in the manual, and comes back.
 This is Japanese medium size!!
- Tourist 2 : Oh...
 Tourist 1 : Hey, this is not 'Fish Burger'!
 Manager : What?!
 Staff : You said 'Fresh Burger'!!
 Tourists 1, 2 : No!!
 Manager : Just a moment!
 マニュアル、マニュアル…！
 Checking manual Let's apologize. I'm sorry! 藤田くん！
- Staff : ...I'm sorry.
 Tourist 1 : Are you gonna get us the 'Fish Burger'?
 Manager : Yes!!
 Tourist 2 : How long does it take?
 Staff : Soon.

Tourist 1 : How soon?
 Manager : What?
 Tourist 2 : We can't spend so much time here.
 Tourist 1 : We are busy. That's why we came here.
 Manager : What?
 Tourist 1 : **With bad Japanese accent**
 ワタシハ、イソガシ〜デス!!
 Staff : Five minutes.
 Tourist 2 : No, we can't wait that long.
 Tourist 1 : Yeah, let's go.
 Staff : ...Sorry. I'll give you your money back.
 Tourist 2 : It's okay. Don't worry.
 Tourist 1 : I guess it's just a miscommunication.
 Tourists 1, 2 : Bye.
 Manager : Sorry. Good bye!
 Tourist 2 : You speak good English by the way.
 Manager : Me? Good English?
 Tourist 1 : Yeah, you bet. Bye. **Off stage**
 Staff : お疲れ様でした。
 Manager : **with a big smile** Me? Good English?
 藤田くん、藤田くん…！ Never mind! Boys be ambitious!

The End

Notes

- 1 Experiential Drama Therapy Workshop in Tokyo: 2008. Tokyo

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